



Stasi Hell or Workers' Paradise?

Socialism in the German Democratic Republic – what can we learn from it?

John Green and Bruni de la Motte



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Cover photograph: Palace of the Republic in Berlin, 1977, since demolished by the Federal government



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CONTENTS

5	Preamble
7	How the GDR came into being
11	A more egalitarian society
12	Social ethos
14	Workers' rights and care of the workforce
17	Social wage
19	Economy
20	Farming and co-operatives
22	Women's rights
24	Childcare
25	Young people
26	Health service
27	Education
30	Culture
32	Freedom and democracy
34	Justice and legal rights
36	Religious freedom
37	Internationalism
38	1990 – demise of GDR socialism
44	Conclusion
49	Notes



Monument to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in Berlin

PREAMBLE 5

While the East European communist-led countries imploded in the 1990s, in the wake of Gorbachov's reforms, market capitalism in the West was enjoying a buoyant new lease of life; all Western leaders declared that we had to embrace global market capitalism as there was no alternative – the 'end of history' was proclaimed. Since then, world capitalism has entered one of its periodic deep crises. Gordon Brown had earlier boasted that the era of 'boom

and bust' was over for good; capitalist reality has amply demonstrated that it is still very much about 'boom and bust'. As the crisis affects ever more people and the well-being of societies, questions are being asked more forcibly about possible alternatives to the system. Could socialism perhaps be the answer after all, despite the fact that the Eastern European versions failed?

Today, many of us feel atomised, as individuals on our own, subject to outside forces beyond our control. We face factory and workplace closures, sackings, mortgage default, possible eviction and debt; the fear of falling into poverty or becoming sick haunts many of us. Our leaders tell us the state can no longer afford to pay pensions, provide adequate welfare or free healthcare and education for all. They maintain that we are on a global juggernaut and totally under its control; we can't stand apart, nor can we determine our own destiny – the economic crisis is a global one and we all have to suffer.

The socialist experience offered a different narrative: individuals within society felt they had more control over their own destinies, and the socialist countries did not go through comparable economic crises, but demonstrated a continuing rise in living standards and individual wellbeing.

6 However, few would think seriously of attempting to return to

the socialist systems of the Soviet type. But even if these countries – demonised by the West as the 'evil empire' – did have serious political shortcomings and their economies were sluggish and often inefficient, that should not lead us to overlook their impressive economic, social, cultural and educational achievements. Their economies were structured to serve the interests of the people, not vice-versa as under capitalism.

Both before and since the demise of the East European socialist systems, western leaders and pundits have continuously devalued anything and everything that was undertaken during the years of communist governments. There has been little interest or desire to undertake a serious debate or evaluation of the communist experiment. No genuine attempt has been made to assess what really went wrong and why, or if anything could be worth emulating. We have had only a blanket condemnation of totalitarianism. We have been continually inoculated against the contagious virus of socialism by stock images of Stasi-run, tyrannical and soulless states, grey, faceless housing blocks, shops devoid of goods and oppressed peoples – a depressing uniformity everywhere.

When the socialist governments came to power in the aftermath of the

SecondWorldWar, their countries had been laid waste by the conflict. In addition, East Germany had to deal with the legacy of a people steeped in fascist ideology, who were demoralised and resentful of the victors. None of the socialist countries enjoyed the largesse of the US Marshall Plan which helped rebuild West Germany, Japan and Italy after the war, but instead were subject to tight blockades and even sabotage to ensure that socialism wouldn't succeed. The defeat of Hitler in 1945 was succeeded by a new and protracted Cold War, aimed at isolating the socialist countries, that fed on animosity, suspicion and mistrust.

Al Gore in his book *Earth in the Balance*¹ states that there was, 'a conscious shared decision by men and women in the nations of the "free world" to make the defeat of the communist system the central organizing principle of not only their governments' policies but of society itself.' The Marshall Plan played a central part in that effort; its aim was to keep countries like West Germany, Italy, France and Greece within the US orbit and to counter the powerful influence of the communist parties which had played such a key role in the resistance to fascism.

Although the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were dominated by the powerful Soviet Union and their systems largely modelled on the Soviet one, there were significant differences; it is impossible to generalise for them all. Despite the tyrannical rule of Stalin and the crimes perpetrated by his regime in the name of communism, tremendous achievements were made in all the socialist countries. One of the most successful of these was the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

HOW THE GDR CAME INTO BEING

This booklet is an attempt neither to justify nor denigrate. It is, rather, an attempt to assess what aspects of GDR-style socialism were genuine achievements in terms of human progress and are perhaps worth salvaging, emulating or learning from. Enough has been said and written about how awful the system supposedly was: a people imprisoned by a wall and oppressed by an omnipresent Stasi security apparatus, ruled by a communist dictatorship. We have avoided going over the same ground because we feel such one-sided characterisations of the GDR are based largely on prejudice, ignorance and wilful animosity. We are more concerned in looking at what other (mainly western) writers have almost entirely ignored – those aspects of GDR society which were positive and which can provide us with insights about our own society and its failings as well as demonstrate

that other alternatives are possible.

The GDR was created, almost as a historical accident, in October 1949, out of the former Soviet Zone of occupied Germany, in



GDR – built from the ruins

-of Nazi Germany

8 response to the introduction of a separate currency in the Western sectors and the go-it-alone creation of the Federal Republic in September 1949. It was the Western allies' unilateral introduction of a new currency which led the Soviet Union to close links with West Berlin (an island within the centre of the Soviet Zone) which led directly to the Berlin Airlift.

The country it became and the policies it pursued were determined by a combination of circumstances. Everything that happened during its 40 years of existence cannot be excused by the circumstances, but they can to a large extent be explained and better comprehended by an understanding of those circumstances. Throughout its existence, its policies could not be separated from those of its 'protector' the USSR. The fact also that it was geographically situated on the front line of the ColdWar, also very much determined the course of its history.

Many of the leaders of the post-war East German, later GDR, government had a track record of active opposition to the Nazi regime; many had spent years in concentration camps, prison and exile, either in the Soviet Union or in western countries. A number of them were Jewish who had escaped Nazi extermination. However the workers' and socialist movements within Germany had been destroyed by Hitler, and many leaders had been murdered in the concentration camps. This background was different from that of most of the other communist governments in Eastern Europe. These exiles returned determined to build a democratic, anti-fascist Germany – that

was the intention, and even if those goals were not fully achieved, the GDR certainly eradicated fascism and attempted under the most inauspicious circumstances to build an alternative society to that in the West.

It is also perhaps worthwhile noting that a majority of German people, after the war, like those in Britain, were adamant they did not want a return to pre-war capitalism. In a number of referenda large majorities in the western zones voted to nationalise the big industries, banks and utilities. It was the occupying powers of the US and Britain that vetoed these democratic decisions.²

While the GDR might not have been the epitome of democracy, the Federal Republic was certainly no paragon either. In 1950 it banned all communists from public service. In 1956 it outlawed the German Communist Party, the Free German Youth organisation, the Federation of Victims of Fascism and the German–Soviet Friendship Society, while protecting and re-instating former Nazis.

There are a whole number of additional reasons why East Germany began life at a great disadvantage when compared with West Germany. It comprised only a third of German territory with a population of 17 million, as against 63 million in West Germany,

GDR



The GDR consisted of the five easternmost Länder of Germany (the former Soviet Zone of Occupation). It comprised only a third of German territory

10 and was considerably poorer than its much larger western counterpart, having little heavy industry and few mineral resources. It also found itself

largely separated from its traditional western German market. Furthermore, while large sums had been poured into West Germany, the Soviet Union, in the early years, not only invested nothing in the economy of its zone but actually took out large amounts in reparation for the devastation caused by the Nazis in the Soviet Union. Immediately after the end of the war, it removed much of East Germany's industry (more than 1,900 factories and 13,500 km of rail-track)³.

Military industries and those owned by the state or by Nazi activists and war criminals were confiscated. These industries amounted to approximately 60% of total industrial production in the Soviet zone of Germany. It has been estimated that by 1949, 100% of the automotive, between 90%-100% of the chemical, and 93% of the fuel industries were in Soviet hands. After the death of Stalin and the 1953 June uprising in the GDR, in response to the government's imposition of new work norms, the Soviet Union began to return the East German factories it had taken in reparations and began offering vital economic support.

The renowned West German historian, Arno Peters, calculated that of the hundred billion German Marks of reparation paid by Germany to the allies in the wake of the Second World War, 98% was actually paid by East Germany and only 2% by West Germany.⁴

Largely as a result of large scale foreign, mainly US, investment in the early post-war period, West Germany soon recovered its prewar economic eminence; its population was again soon enjoying relatively high standards of living. The GDR, as its poorer neighbour, found itself haemorrhaging qualified workers and professionals through its open border with the West in Berlin. Many were not fleeing communist persecution, but simply voting with their feet for higher salaries and a wider range of consumer goods on offer in the West. Annual emigration increased from an estimated figure of around 143,000 in 1959 to 199,000 in 1960. The majority of these were white collar and professional workers and 50% were under 25 years of age. The labour drain exceeded a total of 2.5 million citizens between 1949 and 1961, when the Wall was built. The open border in Berlin also made it a Mecca for spies and for acts of sabotage against the GDR. So the Wall was built by the GDR in August 1961 as an attempt to stem the drain of skilled personnel and to take proper control of its own borders.

West Germany's relatively high wages and decent working conditions came about in large part because, as a 'showcase' for capitalism, it had to

demonstrate its supremacy over the GDR. It was often said that the GDR was an invisible but powerful presence at the negotiating table when Western trade unions negotiated with their bosses.

Those aspects of socialist society highlighted in the following text are among the most significant and would have relevance for those attempting to build socialism in Britain or elsewhere.

A MORE EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

One of the greatest achievements was the introduction and maintenance of a more egalitarian society. Pre-war Germany, like all western societies, had been characterised by class privilege. The top echelons of government, the diplomatic service, medicine, law, higher education etc. had been dominated by the upper and middle classes. Women had been largely confined to their traditional domestic and low-paid roles. The GDR immediately began introducing a series of measures to counter this class and gender privilege and increase the educational and career prospects of working class children. This was highly successful and the GDR became probably the most egalitarian society in Europe.

Full gender equality and equal pay were also enshrined in leg



Alexanderplatz Berlin in the Eighties

islation. Pay differentials between different groups of employees were minimal, so that even top managers or government ministers were hardly wealthy in Western terms, although they did enjoy a rather more privileged existence than their office cleaner. Even in terms of housing, economic and class difference played little role. All areas contained a mix of professional and working class people. Interestingly, despite all the demonisation of the former communist world, few pundits have attempted to provide evidence that the former leaders or party officials amassed inordinate wealth, or had their own private mansions, as many despots and business owners in the capitalist world have done.

This lack of large wealth differentials, class privilege and ghettoisation

made for a much more cohesive and balanced society devoid of the sort of tensions we find in the west. In their recent book, *The Spirit Level – Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*,



Berlin, 1976

Young people hanging out. Alexanderplatz,

authors Wilkinson and Pickett⁵ demonstrate clearly how income inequalities are one of the main causes of social ills. And, undoubtedly, in the GDR a more egalitarian distribution of wealth made society healthier. For some, of course, such egalitarianism was not amenable, and the lure of higher salaries and business opportunities in the West remained strong.

SOCIAL ETHOS

In our own society, which is dominated by the freemarket ideology, we have seen a breakdown of communities, of solidarity and mutual care, particularly since Thatcher announced that ‘no such thing as society exists’. We have become a society of self-centred individuals. Our society is ridden with fears – of crime, unemployment, homelessness and isolation. One of the great achievements of the GDR was to create a stable society largely free of such 13 existential fears. Everyone had a right to education, a job and a roof over their heads. An emphasis was placed on society, rather than on individualism, promoting co-operation, solidarity and mutual help.

This process of socialisation began with children in the kindergartens, continued through school and into the workplace and housing estates. Almost everyone felt responsible for communal areas, for the cleanliness of their housing block, the transport systems, public buildings and their workplaces.

In schools the better pupils helped those less able and class achievements were seen as equally important as one’s own individual attainments. A sense of pride grew in achievements of the school class, the school itself or the state – they were things everyone had contributed towards and of which they could be proud.

In the factories the brigade or team system also helped engender the idea

of co-operation and better working together. Brigades would also socialise outside work and celebrate joint successes with a social get-together in a local restaurant, a group trip to the theatre, exhibitions or sporting events.

The majority of people were encouraged to think and behave in terms of promoting the good of society and not simply their own individual advancement or wealth.

All this brought about a more cohesive society; people felt a sense of belonging, and there was a general lack of cynicism and pessimism. People felt part of a system which wasn't exploitive and in which they were valued as vital contributors to the greater wellbeing of all. They were imbued with hope and witnessed a steady improvement in their material well-being and could look forward to a secure future for themselves and their children. Some were dissatisfied with their own material circumstances, or disagreed with a number of measures taken by the government and complained of things they disliked, but they rarely felt they



Elleben: young volunteers digging an irrigation canal



Taking it easy at an open air music festival, 1986

14 were being ripped off, exploited or demeaned. They accepted that the government was largely on their side, that it wanted the best for the people and the nation as a whole.

This social ethos and the fact that everyone felt responsible in some way

for what happened around them, meant that serious crime and anti-social behaviour was minimal. In general, people had no fears of being out on the streets late at night or entering particular areas of a city; women, too, were not subjected to the levels of sexual harassment they often endure in capitalist countries. Not that such things didn't happen, they did, but were on such a small scale as to be insignificant. The absence of mass advertising and sex misused as a sales tool also helped mitigate psychological pressures on individuals.

Children were generally seen as the responsibility of everyone. Fully qualified staff in schools and nurseries ensured children were well cared for and educationally stimulated. Neighbours, too, took an interest in and were concerned about children's wellbeing. There were thus very few cases of abuse, abandonment, delinquency or serious mental health problems as a result of lack of care.

WORKERS' RIGHTS AND CARE OF THE WORKFORCE

It was not just in the rhetoric that workers and workers' rights were placed high on the policy agendas of the socialist countries. After all, the main aim of any socialist state, based on the theories of Marx and Engels, was to achieve the freedom of workers from exploitation and oppression; they were seen as the motor and central pillar of society. Work itself was elevated to a place of pride and esteem and, even if you happened to be in a lower paid or manual job, you were valued for the work you did which was necessary for the functioning of society. The socialist countries were also designated 'workers' states and it was not merely an empty phrase when their governments argued that the workers, who produced the commodities that society needed, should be placed at the forefront of society.

Those who did heavy manual work, like miners or steel workers, enjoyed certain privileges: better wages and health care than those in less strenuous or dangerous professions, like office work or teaching.

In the GDR, factories and workplaces had a constitutional obligation to ensure the care and health of their workers, but they also had responsibilities in the social sphere. The GDR saw itself as a worker-centred society in which not only the state but every employer together with the trade union had a duty of care for their workforce. There were workplace clinics, doctors and dentists attached to large factories and institutions. For those working in more dangerous or less healthy environments there was regular health monitoring. From medical care, to the provision of leisure and holiday facilities and

childcare, even down to the most personal issues of finding accommodation were often taken care of by the workplace. Larger factories or institutions had their own children's holiday centres set up for their employees' children. Their children could go on summer or winter holidays without their parents and would be looked after by trained staff, who organised games and activities for them.

Workers were involved in discussions of workplace issues and the organisation of the work process. Though, real involvement in the economic and production plans of their workplaces was often realised more on paper than in reality.

The national trade union (FDGB) in the GDR was often dismissed in the West as merely a state run organisation to prevent workers rebelling or going on strike. However, even though it didn't have the independence from the state that trade unions have in the West, it played a key role in ensuring the



Steelworkers on May Day



A Vietnamese worker assembling refrigerators at DKK Scharfenstein, a Publicly Owned Enterprise (1980)

16 health and safety and wellbeing of the workforce.

The trade union owned and ran a whole number of rest homes, sanatoria and holiday accommodation which were used by the workforce and their families for nominal prices. This system helped solve the problem for working parents of caring for their children during school holiday periods. By the 1980s around 80% of the population was able to go on some form of

holiday, although most of these would be taken in the GDR itself, many in one of such centres at very low prices.⁶

No worker could be sacked, unless for serious misconduct or incompetence. However, even in such cases, other alternative work would be offered. The other side of the coin was that there was also a social obligation to work – the GDR had no system of unemployment benefit, because the concept of unemployment did

not exist. There were, of course, cases where employees were sacked illegally for what was considered ‘oppositional behaviour’, but usually the sanction involved demotion rather than sacking.

There were, of course, workplace grievances which were sometimes not solved to the satisfaction of the workforce and a strike would take place. In 1971, for instance, 48 strikes took place and 39 in 1972.⁷ Strikes were not officially banned, but were certainly not encouraged and every effort was made to solve problems before they reached such a stage.

Productivity in the GDR was undoubtedly lower than in similar industrialised nations. This was in no small measure due to a policy of full employment, which meant that there were often comparably more workers and staff in the workplaces than in the West. Working conditions were, as a result, also less stressful and there was a more relaxed atmosphere. The workplace, for many, was also a focus for social and leisure activity.

Smaller employers – services, craftsmen and repair shops were encouraged to join co-operatives which were seen as a more efficient way of organising. However, many small businesses did remain privately owned and often had a privileged material existence because their services were so much in demand and there was little competition.

Working people in the GDR certainly had a level of selfconfidence, a feeling of self-worth and dignity which is often missing among the workforces under capitalism. This influenced the mental health of individual workers and helped cement a social cohesion – positive impacts that can not be underestimated.

SOCIAL WAGE

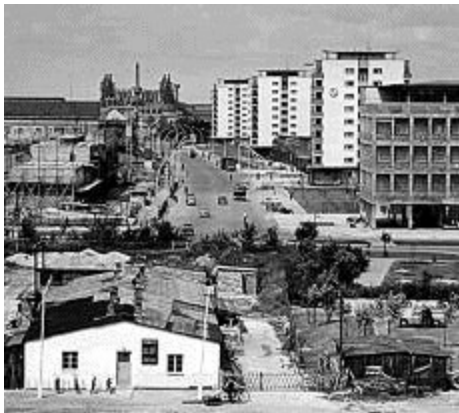
Wage differentials were minimal and the difference between a low earner and high earner was nowhere near as vast as in the West. Pay levels in general were not very high compared to western standards. But everyone knew that the profits they created by their work would go into the ‘social pot’

and would be used to make life better for everyone, not just for a few owners or shareholders who would pocket the surplus. Most people recognised that the surplus they created helped increase what was called the 'social wage'; subsidised food, clothing and rent, cheap public transport, inexpensive tickets for cultural, sporting and leisure activities would all come into the category of 'social wage'.

Every newly married couple under 25 received an interest-free loan from the state to help them set up a home. With the birth of each child mothers received the equivalent of one month's wages to buy essential items for the child. The impact on individuals and families of such state subsidies, apart from their social value, cannot be overstated. The idea of a social wage is a vital concept for any society purporting to be egalitarian. It was instrumental in ensuring the implementation of greater social equality,



The tram a much used form of urban transport



A new city designed and built from scratch, 1953 – Eisenhüttenstadt (Steel Works City), the name it still bears today

18 undermining privilege and class hegemony.

It was difficult to buy a car in the GDR and there was a very long waiting list – but this didn't mean people couldn't travel. The railway system, buses and trams were efficient, regular and cheap, including in the rural areas where there was a comprehensive and regular bus service. In the towns subsidised

public transport could be used for a flat rate of 20 Pfennigs (around 10 pence) and you were trusted to pay, and even though controls were few, almost everyone did pay. Owning one's own personal means of transport was a luxury only a minority had, but few really needed.

Although most people in the GDR lived in rented accommodation (at controlled and affordable rents – typically 5-10% of one's income), a considerable minority owned their own houses

and some (often craftsmen, small business people, but also workers) built their own privately-owned houses. Rents remained virtually unchanged over the life of the GDR and no one could be evicted from their home. There was therefore no homelessness or fear of becoming homeless, although many people's living conditions were far from ideal. The war had left an acute housing shortage, and throughout its history the GDR fought to overcome the lack of decent housing.

In 1971, Erich Honecker, after his election as General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, announced a massive house-building programme as 'a core aspect of social policy' and promised that by 1990 'housing as a social problem would be a thing of the past'.⁸ Between 100,000 and 110,000 homes (mostly flats) were built each year from the mid-1970s to the mid-80s.⁹ There was not the urge to own one's own home in the GDR as rents were cheap because they were subsidised and security of tenure was guaranteed by law. Even so, between 11,000 and 12,000 privately-owned homes were built every year during the 1980s.¹⁰

ECONOMY 19

It is not easy to make an objective statistical comparison between the GDR economy and that of other capitalist countries because the basis on which statistics were collected in the socialist countries and the methods of financial accounting were often very different from those in the West. However, the GDR's ranking of 10th among the world's chief industrial nations and second amongst the Comecon (East European economic alliance) countries was widely accepted.

From a country with few raw materials and an under-developed industry, devastated by the Second World War, the GDR rose to become a leading industrial nation. It exported, among others, machine tool and mining equipment, textile machinery, printing presses and optical goods of world class quality to many countries. By 1988 it was exporting 39% of its total industrial output (the equivalent figure for the Federal Republic was 32.4%);

most of this went to Eastern Europe but a not insignificant amount to western countries.¹¹

The economy was characterised by central planning. This enabled the government to plan growth, set priorities and determine vital areas for investment and expansion; but there was the downside that such centralised planning on such a scale could be inflexible and cumbersome too. Although the GDR economy was a success, compared with most other medium-sized countries, it did suffer from acute shortages and log-jams in a number of areas, and there is no doubt that an expansion of the co-operative system and some decentralisation, particularly in the area of the consumer industries, could have been beneficial. A vital factor holding back the GDR economy (and that of other socialist countries) was a strict boycott by western governments, banning the export of advanced technology to the socialist world.

The GDR economy was a mixed economy but with the



The famous Carl Zeiss optics factory in Jena, 1958



GDR heavy construction machinery stand at the international trade fair in Leipzig which used to attract over 100,000 visitors from around the world.

20 overwhelming majority of companies being owned and run by the state on behalf of the people. There were though many small cooperatives and even private companies which contributed significantly to the overall

economy. Over 90% of all assets in the GDR were owned by the people in the form of 'publicly-owned enterprises' (VEBs); at the time of unification, there were 12,354 such 'publicly-owned enterprises'.¹² In the Federal Republic, by contrast, a mere 10% of households owned 42% of all private wealth and 50% of households owned only 4.5%.¹³

The private sector in the GDR was small but not insignificant in terms of its contribution to GDP. In 1985, about 2.8% of net national product came from private enterprises. The private

sector included farmers and gardeners; independent craftsmen, wholesalers, and retailers; and those who worked freelance (artist, writers, etc). According to GDR statistics, in 1985, there were about 176,800 private entrepreneurs. Private companies in the GDR were usually small: electrical installation companies, plumbers, carpenters, bakers, butchers, and few employed more than ten people. Co-operatives were often larger enterprises: retail supermarkets, house-builders, service undertakings and agricultural units.

FARMING AND CO-OPERATIVES

After the victory of the Red Army and its occupation of the eastern third of Germany, land (largely owned by the former landed aristocracy, the Junkers) was distributed to the farmers. 500 Junker estates were expropriated and converted into co-operatives (LPGs) or state farms, and more than 30,000 km² were distributed among 500,000 peasant farmers, agricultural labourers and refugees.

In September 1947, the Soviet military administration announced the completion of agrarian reform throughout the Soviet zone. This report listed 12,355 estates, totalling 6,000,000 acres, which had been seized and redistributed to 119,000 families of landless farmers, 83,000 refugee families, and some 300,000 in other categories.

About 15 years after the end of the war, the GDR government encouraged, sometimes cajoled and pressurised farmers to join co-operative farms. Farmers retained ownership rights to their land, but it was integrated into the co-ops. Although there were a number of state farm holdings, GDR agriculture was characterised by the co-operative system and in this they were well ahead of their time. There were also co-operatively-owned supermarkets and shops, as well as co-operatives formed by tradesmen, service providers and artisans.

It is only recently in the West that the co-operative idea has been given a

new lease of life and is attracting support. By 1960, nearly 85% of all arable land was incorporated into agricultural co-operatives; state farms comprised another 6%. By 1961 these two sectors together produced 90% of the GDR's agricultural products. In 1989, there were 3,844 agricultural coops and 464 state farms. However, the contribution of private farming remained significant, with market garden produce, meat products and eggs often produced from private plots being sold locally.

Farming co-operatives, despite their shaky start and controversial nature, were one of the big achievements of the GDR, proving to be efficient and better for the workforce. For the first time in history, agricultural workers were freed from round-the-clock, year-in, year-out work just to make a living. With agricultural co-operatives run on an industrial scale, agricultural workers enjoyed fixed-hours working and shift systems, had regular holidays, childcare, training opportunities, and workplace canteens.



The pooling of resources and labour through co-operation increased productivity

22 All this certainly helped stem the flight from the countryside to the towns (as has happened in many other countries). During the lifetime of the GDR the percentage of citizens living in the cities with over 100,000 inhabitants barely increased.¹⁴

Despite some early opposition to giving up their individual land-holdings, most farmers did later come to see the sense of co-operatives and enjoyed the fruits of their success. The increasing use of technology and modern techniques on the farms also made the work more attractive to young people and helped keep them in the countryside. It was also a fact that the per-head production figures of most co-operatives were far better than those of individual farmers in the West. The cooperative principle, particularly in the agricultural sphere demonstrated that it could offer a third way between often barely economically viable family farms or industrialised production, which has been responsible for the destruction of social struc



A piggery on a co-operative farm

tures and the environment in the countryside in many countries.

In today's unified Germany, a few of these co-operatives have survived – almost the only aspect of the old GDR to do so. However, even this was only possible after bitter struggle, challenging Western attempts to dismantle them, often through the courts.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

For the first time in German history, women in the GDR enjoyed completely equal rights with men, both in their personal sphere and in the workplace. They were provided with the means and opportunities of developing their careers and personalities beyond or instead of their traditional roles in the home, as wives, mothers and daughters. 91% of women between the ages of 16 and 60 were in work. And in a survey carried out by the Institute for Social Research (INFAS) in 1992, 50% of women from the 23 former GDR saw success in their careers as a main source of fulfilment (this is about the same percentage as for men).

However, if you view women's rights and female emancipation primarily in terms of certain feminist ideals, such as women-run institutions and organisations, then the GDR was not particularly emancipated. However, comparative studies by West German researchers have shown that GDR women had a greater independence than those in West Germany. Vital in promoting this were the measures taken to encourage women in obtaining higher qualifications, liberal divorce laws, the right to abortion (since 1972) and universal childcare, as well as wage equality. While these measures were not taken purely for emancipatory reasons – the GDR had an acute labour shortage and women's active participation in the workforce was essential for the health of the economy as a whole – nevertheless the overall result was emancipatory.

Gender equality meant that women earned as much as any man for doing the same job. All careers, except very dangerous ones, like coal mining, were open to women. This meant that most adults worked and it gave women an

independence undreamed of in past times. In the GDR 88% of all adult women worked and a further 8.5% were in full-time education. A third of all women were in technical professions and 50% of all jobs in medicine and law were held by women; in industry 41% of all employees were women; the number studying maths and sciences was 46%. Most women were also highly skilled; only 6% had no qualification at all whereas in the Federal Republic 24% had none. Despite these astounding figures, in the top echelons of government and party in the GDR male patriarchy still persisted.

Women in the GDR felt more liberated; separation and divorce were relatively easy, not least because they rarely involved property share-outs. And partnerships that didn't involve formal marriage were also quite widespread. Because of women's new sense of



Women's rights in the GDR were among the most advanced anywhere in the developed world

24 freedom from the worries of the costs of bringing up children and funding their care, the birth-rate in the GDR was healthy, unlike in the Federal Republic, where it fell under the population replacement rate. Most young women in the GDR could and did choose to have children and work at the same time.

CHILDCARE



Daycare facility at the steelworks in Riesa, 1951

The GDR had arguably one of the best childcare systems in the world. The state provided virtually free nurseries and kindergartens (parents could choose between a workplace or neighbourhood nursery/kindergarten); only food had to be paid for

– a nominal charge. This system was vital in enabling women to embark on careers outside the home and explains why 91% of all women of childbearing age

opted to have children. The nurseries and kindergartens were run by trained professionals, who provided the children with a stimulating and, according to their age, appropriate educational input. They were a strong force in the vital socialisation of children.

From 1980 onwards, mothers qualified for 12 months leave from work after the birth of each child, on full pay; and this leave could be shared between both parents. They could also take up to six weeks off work per year to look after sick children; and there was a no-redundancy protection for single mothers.

Primary schools which, like all schools in Germany, finished their day at lunchtime, stayed open in the afternoons and offered a secure and supervised place for children to do their homework or play before their parents returned home from work. Children were also given decent meals at school or nursery during the day, to ensure adequate and healthy nutrition. During the school holidays, supervised activities for children were organised in the schools and Pioneer centres (The Young Pioneers was the national organisation for younger children).

YOUNG PEOPLE

The Free German Youth (FDJ) was the only officially recognised youth organisation and most young people belonged to it. The FDJ has been universally characterised in the West merely as an organisation for indoctrinating young people along the lines of the Hitler Youth. While it was undoubtedly envisaged as a means of educating young people in the ethos of socialism, to reduce it to an indoctrinal function alone would be to miss its essential character altogether. It could better be compared with our Boy Scout and Girl Guide movements, but with a more overt political character.

In the GDR young people were given every encouragement to achieve the highest educational attainments, to undertake career training and partake in leisure and sports activities.

The Young Pioneer organisation (for children up to 14 years old) and the FDJ, for young people above 14, were the organisations that undertook much of this work. The Young Pioneers were hardly political with a capital 'P' at all, but did imbue their members with an ethos of solidarity, co-operation and social responsibility. Young pioneers put on concerts for older people, did

shopping for them, helped collect materials to be recycled and winter feed for wild animals. They had their own cultural centres and venues where they could pursue their individual interests, from model-making, playing musical instruments, dancing or singing, in a less formal environment than at school.

The FDJ had been set up as an anti-fascist youth movement in 1936; however, its counterpart in West Germany was declared illegal by the Federal government, already as early as 1951, together with the German Communist Party.

Although it was very much guided by the state and was seen as a means of political orientation for the youth of the country, its overall aims were humanistic and it promoted the ideas of international and national solidarity, co-operation and social responsibility. It organised, for instance, national and international festivals where 25



Free German Youth contingent on a demonstration, 1979



The Puhdys – one of the best loved GDR rock bands, still going

26 young people from different countries could meet. It was instrumental in developing the national song movement with its yearly festivals in Berlin.

FDJ members took part in international working holidays to help other countries and worked on the construction of a huge pipeline in the Soviet Union. At home it organised open-air rock concerts as well as numerous club activities and political discussions. It was represented in schools and colleges as the official student voice and had representatives in Parliament.

With the abolition of these organisations in East Germany after

unification, together with the destruction of the GDR's economic base, there was a huge loss of jobs. There was also a deterioration of communal support in terms of youth centres and as a result many young people have felt abandoned. It is little wonder that some of them have been attracted to right wing extremist groups.

HEALTH SERVICE

In the GDR, medical and dental care were completely free to everyone. Central to GDR healthcare was a preventative medical care system and in the forefront of this approach were the polyclinics (interestingly now being promoted in Britain, alas with the emphasis placed on private provision). These were medical centres based in residential areas or large workplaces whose main role was preventative and diagnostic health care, as well as treatment and rehabilitation. Medical and non-medical personnel from the various medical sectors were under one roof; doctors and other medical staff were employed by the state.

All medication on prescription was free. Victorian-style wards were unknown; even older hospitals had smaller wards than in Britain. In the 1970s modern hospitals were built which had wards for no more than two or three patients. 27

Every nursery and kindergarten was allocated a paediatrician who made weekly visits to check the health of the children. This helped to diagnose early signs of health problems and was a great support for families. Dentists would visit primary schools at regular intervals to check children's teeth. This meant that parents didn't have to take time off work to visit doctors and dentists for regular check ups.

Although not specific to the GDR or the socialist countries as a whole, there was an excellent sanatorium system which provided long periods of recuperation or rehabilitation in spa resorts or retreats in the countryside (often in former stately homes), for those deemed to be in need of such care. This was particularly valuable for those suffering chronic illness or in need of recuperative care impossible to find at home. Single mothers in need of respite care were also given the opportunity to recuperate in these sanatoria free of charge.

EDUCATION

Immediately after the close of the Second World War, East Germany carried out a thorough denazification of the teaching staff in schools and other learning institutions. After all, it was these teachers who had been, in

the main, willing accomplices in indoctrinating a generation of children with Nazi ideology and the virus of racism. A new generation of teachers was essential if the post-war generation of children was to be freed of this burden. In West Germany, such a thorough clear-out of the teaching staffs was not carried out and in fact many ex-Nazis were reinstated and even promoted. The GDR also carried out a complete re-organisation of the learning process and curricula to overcome decades of privileged



Jugendweihe – secular coming of age ceremony at 14

access by an elite to education, and entrenched class and gender discrimination as well as the old urban-rural divide. This was also essential to rid the educational system of the old racist and supremacist nationalism of the past.

A fully comprehensive school system was introduced with a national curriculum. This meant that school students everywhere studied the same courses and were taught to the same standards. For parents there was no soul-searching about choosing schools – you knew that your local school would be as good as any other, whether it was in a large metropolis or in a village. The old grammar school (Gymnasium) system which provided wealthy and middleclass families a privileged access route to university and the professions was abolished. There were no private schools – all children went to state schools. At under 30, class sizes in both primary and secondary schools were also smaller than in many other countries.

All children completed ten years of schooling and finished with a certificate to prove that they had reached a set standard. Those who intended to go on to higher education, completed two more years and took their Abitur (A-level equivalent), which was the necessary entrance qualification for college or university.

Unlike in the Federal Republic, school books were either free or heavily subsidised and available at affordable prices. In an attempt to redress the decades of discrimination towards working class and farm workers' children, a form of positive discrimination was introduced for university entrance to overcome this (comparable, perhaps, with the attempt in the USA to actively

promote blacks). All children achieved minimum educational qualifications – there were few drop-outs – and if young people didn't achieve the academic qualifications they would later need, adult and further education were made readily accessible at every stage of their working lives. Thus young people could continue career training and at the same time study for their A-levels.

The egalitarianism in the school system meant that children from all different backgrounds mixed and made friends; there were no feelings of class difference, of material deprivation or of exclusion. This led to a much more relaxed and happier society, devoid of the tensions caused by class and large wealth differences in western societies.

One of the chief innovations of the GDR school system was the introduction of 'Politechnical' education, in an attempt to better integrate schools into the social fabric and the world of work. It was also intended to overcome the lop-sided view of education as only 'head-work'. Every secondary school student, from the age of 14, would have four hours once a week devoted to developing practical skills, usually in a factory or workplace situated in the vicinity of the school. This not only gave young people a true sense of what working life was all about, but showed them how the necessities of life are produced and, meeting and working alongside manual workers, they developed a respect for them and the contribution they make to society. It also forged stronger social links between schools and workplaces, between workers and students as well as teachers, that was often extended into the social and cultural spheres. This system was only possible because all larger companies were state-owned and even farms were either co-operatives or state-owned, so they were obliged to co-operate in making the process work. The system was actually much admired among a number of pedagogues in the West, but never introduced there – and since unification it has been abolished.

The country also had a number of specialist sports, foreign languages, maths and musical schools where talented youngsters received extra specialist coaching, alongside the normal curriculum. Despite all the later allegations of doping in the GDR sports world – some undoubtedly true – it was this schooling system that was vital in producing a generation of world class sportsmen and women.

The GDR system of continued access to further education was also innovative and helped overcome educational discrepancies. This made it possible for all workers to continue their education throughout their working

lives, and workplaces were obliged to support this. Many industrial and



Renowned ice skater, Katarina Witt. Here as a student with her trainer, Jutta Müller



Foreign Students at Karl Marx University in Leipzig, 1960

30 agricultural workers, whose schooling had begun pre-war and who had had no opportunity to study, now had the chance to make up for it. Special ‘Worker and Peasant Faculties’ were established in the universities to provide access courses for people without basic educational qualifications, who wished to go on to higher education. There were also special opportunities for women who, due to family commitments, had missed out on higher education.

All students were awarded grants, which were minimal but enough to survive on, especially since student accommodation was heavily subsidised (a room in a student hostel cost the equivalent of about £3 a month). Traditional gender discrimination in schools, universities and in the professions was abolished and women were given special encouragement and incentives to gain higher qualifications. This led to a significant increase in girls taking up and qualifying at higher levels in traditional male subjects, like maths, engineering and the natural sciences.

Every pupil who left school, if they did not go on to higher education, would be offered apprenticeship training. There was a widespread system of vocational training schools in which students could study and learn a trade during a three-year course.

Despite the fact that the GDR educational system was widely praised and was recognised as one of the best in the world, on unification its school system was abolished, without reasons, and the old discriminatory three-tier secondary school system of the Federal Republic imposed, with a predictable ensuing chaos for both students and teachers.

CULTURE

Every town of 30,000 or more inhabitants in the GDR had its theatre and several cinemas as well as other cultural venues. The GDR had roughly half the number of theatres as the Federal Republic, despite having less than a third of the population (178 in 31 the GDR compared with 346).¹⁵ All towns and even many villages had their 'Houses of Culture', owned by the local communities and open for all to use. These were places that offered performance venues, workshop space and facilities for celebratory gatherings, discos, drama groups etc. Subsidised tickets to the theatre and concerts were always priced so that everyone could afford to go.

Many factories and institutions had regular block-bookings for their workers which were avidly taken up. School pupils from the age of 14 were also encouraged to go to the theatre and schools were able to obtain subsidised tickets. There was a lively culture of local music and folk-song groups, as well as classical musical performance.

The art form 'socialist realism' has always been decried and ridiculed in the West, caricatured in the constantly circulated images of monumental statues of muscle-bound male workers and buxom, peasant women in heroic poses. However, such a view ignores those many realistic artists who were not necessarily 'court-appointed' or monumentalists but who chose a realist mode of expression freely.

We now know that the CIA was instrumental in promoting abstract art in the West as an antidote to 'communist' realism.¹⁶ The fact that many artists in the communist countries chose to reject the extreme forms of abstract art and insisted on placing human beings and social reality at the centre of their art should be evaluated properly and not condescendingly dismissed out of hand.

Many artists continued the strong realist tradition, taking it forward into new realms. It connected with ordinary people who saw themselves, their lives and their questions and criticisms taken up by artists. While some conformed and became state-sponsored artists, churning out mediocre art to delight the petit bourgeois taste of the bureaucrats, many others ploughed their own furrow and their work aroused avid interest among the people. This

could be seen not only in painting, but graphics, the theatre, music, literature and, though less so, in the cinema. In the GDR many artists freed themselves from unnecessary ideological fetters and in exhibitions



People's House of Culture, Erich Weinert, in Pritzwalk



Concert audience in the
Palace of Sanssouci, Potsdam

32 often shocked the party functionaries in their rejection of banal socialist realist platitudes. A whole number of artists promoted a progressive and expressively advanced form of critical realism and aesthetics of their own making. The annual national contemporary art exhibition in Dresden drew huge numbers of visitors from all over the country and provoked heated discussions. The country could also boast a whole number of artists, writers and scientists of international renown.

A number of leading writers were seen in many ways as 'people's tribunes', articulating grievances, criticisms and ideas that people felt had no proper airing in the public sphere. People engaged actively with these writers and vice versa. Public readings by, and discussions with, authors were a regular feature of GDR life.

The myth has been perpetuated that because the GDR restricted the import of and access to literature from the West, that GDR citizens were entirely cut off from it. However, a range of works from many contemporary writers from the West were published in the GDR; in fact more British authors were published there than authors from both Germanies combined were published in Britain.

There was a wide selection of international literature available and a

number of foreign films were shown in the cinemas. David Childs, in his book on East Germany,¹⁷ exposes the myth that the GDR populace was totally ignorant and ill-informed about life in the west, most of them, after all were able to tune in daily to West German radio and television.

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

In the West, freedom and democracy have always been defined as the right to vote within a multi-party system. By this definition none of the socialist countries was really democratic or free, even though elections were held. However, freedom and democracy cannot be adequately defined or encapsulated in such a simplistic manner. True freedom and democracy involves much more than voting and choosing between ostensibly different parties at election times. They are found in the interstices of life – in our work, social and family life, in the range of opportunities we are offered in order to fulfil our potential, on a daily basis, how much control we have over our own lives and how accountable to us our representatives are.

The UN defines some basic rights as freedom from fear and the right to housing, to water, health, education and to adequate nourishment. An abstract freedom to vote cannot alone substitute for such basic freedoms. As Paul Ginsborg puts it: 'If citizens share equal rights in the political sphere, but are highly unequal in the economic one, then democracy is likely to be deeply flawed.'¹⁸

The parties people could vote for in the GDR were limited – there were five – but everyone knew that real power lay with the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). However people's democratic rights in their communities and their workplaces were considerable and they could often directly influence affairs that impinged directly on their lives. Most local issues, whether concerning building and planning, cultural issues or the organisation of public events were usually open to public debate. Were these not also freedoms and democratic rights?

One of the greatest sources of bitterness and frustration were the travel restrictions imposed on GDR citizens. People were able to travel to Eastern European countries and even, in restricted numbers, to Cuba. It was, though, hardly possible to make private trips to western countries. There were a number of valid reasons for this, not least a shortage of foreign currency, but also the fear of the country losing key professionals who could command far bigger salaries in the West. From 1964, pensioners were permitted to travel once a year to relatives in the West. As the Federal Republic never

recognised the GDR officially as a separate



Tamara Danz was GDR's equivalent of Patti Smith. Unconventional, rebellious she was the lead singer and lyricist of Silly



Progressive British rocker Tom Robinson in concert, Görlitz, 1987

34 country, GDR citizens automatically qualified for West German passports, thus making defection a simple matter.

While democratic rights, as understood in the West, were limited in the GDR, there was wide participation in democratic processes at grassroots level. For instance during the public

discussions around the formulation of a new family law, a total of over 33,000 meetings took place to discuss the proposed new legislation, on top of those taking place in the press or on radio. A similar process took place during deliberations around the introduction of a new constitution in 1968 and around the draft of new legislation on the rights of young people in 1974.¹⁹

JUSTICE AND LEGAL RIGHTS

Even in areas such as legal rights and justice, perhaps surprisingly, the GDR had much to offer in terms of looking at social alternatives to current structures of the justice system. In the 1970s, the GDR undertook a complete re-writing of the country's Civil Code or legislation as it affected ordinary people. The previous Civil Code of justice had been in place for over a hundred years and indeed some laws went back a lot further. Apart from hardly being appropriate for a modern state, the laws were couched in such archaic language that few ordinary people could understand them. It was

decided to rewrite the Code and make it 'citizen friendly' i.e. comprehensible without the requirement of a degree in jurisprudence or recourse to a lawyer, schooled in its arcane and convoluted language.

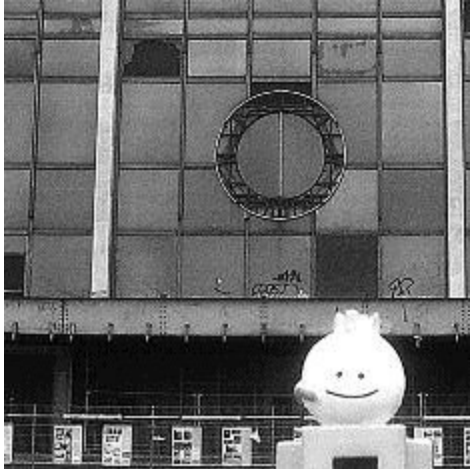
Still today the most recent GDR Civil Code retains a validity and relevance in terms of its innovative approach and removal of layers of dusty, archaic jurisprudence: it re-empowered citizens to undertake much of their own legal administration. This Civil Code was completely rejected after unification and the old, complex and archaic West German one was re-imposed.

It was realised in the GDR that many small conflicts and straightforward legal issues could be dealt with on a local level, often without the need for professional judicial input or going to court. Such issues would be dealt with in the workplace and in communities by so-called 'Conflict Commissions' (already in existence from 1953). They oversaw and took decisions on petty crimes and minor disputes and represented an enormous and innovative breakthrough.

The Commissions were made up of one's own peers from the workplace or residential area. They could not make custodial sentences, nor would they sit on cases of serious crimes, like murder or treason. And most decisions by such Commissions would involve suggestions for rehabilitation, therapy and recompense for victims. They helped overcome potentially unnecessary judicial log-jams in the courts, were far less intimidating for those brought before them and solved many problems without recourse to more draconian measures.

Legal areas such as consumer and inheritance rights, family and the workplace became much more user-friendly and conflicts could often be solved more speedily and easily outside the formal court system.

There was also a system which provided citizens with the means of making complaints to local, regional and national authorities if they felt they had been unjustly treated. This was the 'Eingaben' system (complaints or petition procedure). This system allowed a ventilation of grievances, which were usually dealt with speedily and efficiently by the relevant authorities.²⁰ Civil servants were statutorily obliged to reply to such grievances and to address the issues raised within a fixed time scale. Even if the GDR justice system was far from perfect and certainly injustices, in



A few days after unification the first thing the Federal government did was to remove the GDR national symbol from the Palace of the Republic

36 terms of the treatment of political dissidents, did take place, to characterise it, as the leaders of the new Germany do, as an 'Unrechtsstaat' is clearly a mockery. In German the term 'Unrechtstaat' has the double connotation of a state without justice but also an illegal or unjust one.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Christmas Market in

Berlin, December 1957

The vast majority of GDR citizens did not belong to any faith grouping. However, religious institutions existed and religious leaders were free to carry out their pastoral work. Those who wished to join a religious organisation and go to church could do so without let or hindrance. Religion was not taught in schools and its place was taken by a lesson on ethics and social responsibility.

There was an understanding between state and religious institutions that the state wouldn't interfere in their affairs and the churches would confine their activities to religious affairs and not meddle in matters of the state.

Traditionally the churches had been, with a few honourable exceptions, very conservative and invariably anti-socialist. They had also largely tolerated if not actively supported the Nazi regime. They maintained close links with

their partner churches in the Federal Republic from whom they also received financial support for purposes like church renovation. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the church and religious organisations in general were often viewed with some suspicion. However, there was in the GDR a flourishing Christian and small Jewish community and even a Christian Democratic Party (CDU). Churches were free to hold services and meetings with parishioners, and religious leaders could carry out their religious responsibilities with little or no harassment; some co-operated closely with the SED and organs of state where they felt it helpful. There was even a ministry for religious affairs³⁷ whose express purpose was to liaise with the churches. On issues like the struggle for peace, international solidarity and anti-racism there was often co-operation between religious organisations and the government. Christian churches also ran and maintained a number of hospitals and care homes with government co-operation.

INTERNATIONALISM

The GDR's record on internationalism was exemplary. It took the idea of solidarity with other, struggling nations seriously. It sent doctors and other medical staff to the front line in Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola and other countries; it gave engineering, educational and military support to many countries. It also gave numerous foreign students from countries struggling to free themselves from the legacy of colonialism free training and education in the GDR itself. It also offered refuge to those fleeing oppressive regimes; many Chileans in enforced exile from Pinochet's fascist regime found asylum there.

International solidarity also became part of everyone's daily life: liberation struggles and detailed stories of life in less developed countries was reported in the media daily; in schools and colleges, students learned about the struggles of people in other parts of the world, rather than merely talking about poverty and hunger.

What is also important to stress here, is that although the GDR often reached mutually advantageous trade agreements with the countries to which it gave aid, much of its contribution, particularly to liberation struggles and poorer countries, was totally one-sided – aid was provided out of a genuine sense of internationalism not for economic gain.



GDR doctor working on the frontline in Mozambique, 1987

38 1990 – DEMISE OF GDR SOCIALISM

The GDR didn't simply die; it was given a powerful push over the edge of the cliff by the Federal Republic, or as Gregor Gysi put it tongue in cheek: 'capitalism didn't triumph, it was merely the system that survived.'

All non-private businesses, apart from co-operatives in the GDR, were so-called 'Publicly-owned Enterprises' i.e. run by the state on behalf of the people who were the genuine owners. On 15 March 1990, statutory legislation was passed by the last GDR government under Hans Modrow to set up a Trusteeship quango or 'holding institution' (Treuhandanstalt) 'to ensure the rights and property of the citizens'. At the time, the industrial assets of the GDR were estimated, by West German experts, at 650 billion Marks which meant that every citizen 'owned' assets to the value of around 40,000 Marks.²¹ The Trusteeship would be tasked with ensuring that GDR citizens received certificates of ownership which could later be exchanged, not for cash, but to obtain housing, business premises or similar assets. The setting up of this Trusteeship would also ensure that 'publicly-owned enterprises' were not treated like 'state-owned assets'. This had been one of the demands made by those who took to the streets in 1989 before the Wall came down, shouting: 'We are the people'. If this wasn't done, it was clear, that the people would be 'expropriated'. It has to be noted that of the real capital wealth created by workers in the GDR, 80% was incorporated into publicly-owned assets, while only 20% was actually owned by individual citizens; in the Federal Republic proportional ownership relationships were the reverse.

This arrangement was widely acknowledged by the Federal German government at the time, and was confirmed by the Minister of Finance, Theo Waigel.²² However, after the first (and the last) free elections in the GDR, on 18 March 1990, the Christian Democratic Party, with just over 40% of the votes, came out as the surprising winner. Together with other smaller right

wing parties, it could form a government. A short time later, on 1 July, a hasty currency union was undertaken, with the foreseeable result that the GDR economy was plunged into bankruptcy. Before unification the West German Mark was valued at around 4.5 39 GDR Marks; however, at currency union the GDR Mark was fixed at parity with the West German Mark at a rate of 1:1 with the result that GDR export products rose in price by 450% overnight, and were therefore no longer competitive; the export market (39% of the GDR economy) inevitably collapsed. In addition, the GDR market was flooded immediately by West German products, also severely damaging the internal market. Much was made subsequently of the 'collapse of the out-dated and rotten GDR industries'. What was not explained was that the collapse was directly related to the hasty introduction of the new currency.²³

Immediately following the elections in March 1990, the victorious CDU, in effect, handed over the GDR Trusteeship to West German appointees, many of whom represented big business interests and the last thing they were interested in was having GDR companies as potential competitors. In their hands the Trusteeship proceeded to sell off all GDR publicly-owned enterprises at breakneck speed and at knockdown prices – some factories which were perfectly viable were sold for as little as one Mark!²⁴ There was only a pretence at proper tendering or of attempting to find the highest bids and some of the privatisation process even involved criminal methods and a misuse of state subsidies.

The idea of 'publicly owned' assets being transferred to the citizens by the Trusteeship was quietly dropped, in blatant contravention of the statutory legislation passed by the previous GDR parliament, with no consultation or referendum taking place. No certificates of ownership were issued to the people and they received no compensation whatsoever.

Even if not admitted publicly, the Trusteeship quango, once in Western hands, was undoubtedly given the task of overseeing the rapid dismantling of GDR state assets, so that no potential competition with West German companies would occur. It set about eradicating any legacy of GDR socialism with alacrity: 3,400 factories, 520 large construction companies, 465 cooperatives and thousands of other smaller companies were privatised, and soon thereafter most were closed. In the country



Re-privatisation of land
led to an 80% loss of jobs in agriculture

40 side 1.7 million hectares of agricultural and forest land were sold off. Privatisation (in reality simple asset-stripping) was seen as an ideological imperative. However a few ‘cherries’ were successfully privatised like the Zeiss optical instrument factory in Jena, the largest East German steel works (EKO) and most of the Baltic ship yards – they became successful enterprises, albeit with severely reduced staffing levels (Zeiss for instance had 20,000 employees in GDR times but today a mere 2,000).

Of those companies and individuals who bought ex-GDR property, 85% were West Germans, only 10% were from other countries and a mere 5% went to GDR citizens. Even many co-operatives were forcibly disbanded and their assets put up for sale, but a number of these take-overs were successfully challenged. 80% of workplaces in agriculture were eliminated as a result of the re-privatisation of land.

Not only did large numbers of ordinary workers lose their jobs after the destruction of the GDR infrastructure, but so too did thousands of intellectuals – research workers and academics. It was, according to Horst van der Meer, ‘a decapitation of the GDR’s intellectual capacity’.²⁵ As a result of the purging of academia, research and scientific

establishments in a process of political vetting, more than a million individuals with a degree or equivalent qualification lost their jobs. This constituted around 50% of that group, creating in East Germany the highest percentage of intellectual unemployment in the world; all university chancellors, directors of state enterprises and research institutes and 75,000 teachers lost their jobs and many were blacklisted. 78 research and associated institutes were closed down.²⁶

This process was in stark contrast to what happened in West Germany

after the war, where very few ex-Nazis were treated in this manner. The result was a complete destruction of the GDR's scientific research potential, a terrible intellectual haemorrhage from universities and colleges – in essence a complete eradication of 40 years' accumulated experience and history of the GDR by marginalising those who were best placed to pass that knowledge on to future generations.

Women were worse hit than men. Virtually a whole generation of men and women over 55 were obliged to take early retirement, but this affected almost three times as many women as men. With the imposition of the West German school system, class sizes rose and 25,000 teaching positions were eliminated as a result, again most of these involved women. In the immediate aftermath of unification the birth rate in the territory of the former GDR fell by 65% – a drop unprecedented in any other country in peacetime.

As a result of the destruction of the GDR's economic base, the population of that territory is now made up of 43% pensioners – the young having migrated to find jobs – and 4 out of 10 are officially deemed to be living in 'economically precarious circumstances'.²⁷

Millions of East Germans fell into the clutches of the pre-war owners of their properties (or their heirs, even if these former owners had been active Nazis). As a result of land privatisations and the break-up of agricultural co-operatives only 20% of farmers and agricultural workers kept their jobs (out of a total of over 900, 000).²⁸ In those areas particularly badly hit by claims of restitution, around a fifth of the population have been evicted from their homes which they either owned or rented. In the GDR there was legally guaranteed security of tenure and ownership; this was lifted after unification.

Ironically any claims of restitution the other way around, by East Germans on properties in the West were rejected on the grounds that the time limits for bringing claims had passed. Claims were only admitted for properties in any area which was joining the Federal Republic (i.e. the GDR). Thus Federal laws had made it possible for 2.2 million claims on GDR properties to be lodged but not one the other way around.

The West German political leadership was determined to teach the people in the communist East a lesson – under the pretext



Institute for Forestry and Environmental Protection in Eberswalde -78 such research institutes were closed down after unification

42 that, unlike in the aftermath of the Nazi period, 'this time around the totalitarian system would be properly eradicated and its supporters duly punished'. As a result, over a million East Germans were categorised as being in employment 'close to the state', e.g. civil servants, police and security personnel and media personalities; they were blacklisted and their pension entitlements reduced.

In the GDR there was no statute of limitation on the prosecution of those who committed crimes against humanity. In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, many of those who had fought on the side of the Nazis or worked for them were either not brought to justice or were amnestied and qualified for full pension rights. In the GDR, those who had actively resisted or suffered persecution by the Nazis had been granted an additional pension supplement. These pensions were then reduced by 300 Marks by the German government after unification; yet members of the former Waffen-SS in Lithuania (some then living in the UK, USA or Australia) had been granted war pensions. These were the same people who had helped the Nazis murder more than 94% of the 70,000 Jews who lived in Lithuania before the war (despite the fact that the Waffen-SS had been characterised as a criminal organisation by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal).²⁹

This was in marked contrast to the treatment of those who were considered to have worked in key positions for the GDR administration, who also had their pensions reduced. Many who had resisted the Nazis and were forced to spend years in exile or were interred in prison or concentration camps found that those years were not pensionable. The message is: it was not ignoble to serve the Nazis but it was the Communists; active resistance to injustice was not valued.

Even compensation offered to those considered to be victims of repression were dealt with using different criteria: those who were considered

to have been wrongly imprisoned in the GDR received 550 Marks for each month spent in prison, whereas those who had been in Nazi concentration camps qualified for only 150 Marks for each month of incarceration. This graphically illustrates the double standards used in the new unified Germany.

The media in the GDR – radio, television, film and newspapers⁴³ were subject to monitoring and censorship by the SED leadership, but that didn't mean there was no quality reporting, programming and feature-writing. It was always a battle of wits and of testing the boundaries by journalists and film-makers vis à vis the party leadership. However, in the short period between the opening of the Wall (on 9 November 1989) and the final accession of the GDR to the Federal Republic (3 October 1990), but while the GDR still existed and had its own government, the media enjoyed an unprecedented freedom from both party dictates as well as commercial pressures.

Journalists relished their new freedom and audiences enjoyed access to a wide range of different perspectives. GDR journalists proved that they were not only supremely capable of reporting the truth and investigating news stories, but were also able to competently run their own media institutions. With unification this era came to an abrupt stop: television and radio stations were taken over or closed down, as were film studios and newspapers. Most journalists and film-makers were purged and lost their jobs.

Immediately following the currency union, in July 1990, half a million freshly printed books were pulped, including those by classical authors, works of writers exiled by fascism, coffee-table volumes and even Bach scores. Publishing houses were closed. Even those GDR authors who had been lauded in the West over the years for their 'dissident' writings, were suddenly of no interest anymore and were dropped like hot bricks.

Is it any wonder that many East Germans didn't feel there had been a unification between equals, but that they had been taken over and were now treated as a colony. To underline that metaphor, many West German officials and managers who were sent to work in the East received a special 'hardship' bonus which they termed a 'bush premium'.



Bertholt Brecht, the GDR's most famous playwright – an articulate and passionate adversary of capitalism

44 CONCLUSION

After reading this description of life in the GDR, the reader could perhaps be persuaded that it was a paradise or, on the other hand, they may feel convinced that the writers have seen reality retrospectively through very rose-coloured spectacles. However, what is recounted here is based on factual information, not hearsay or myth. It can easily be verified in any of the more objective treatises on the GDR. It is not, of course, a complete or comprehensive picture nor does it purport to be a balanced assessment; it is intended rather to correct the gross imbalance of most western reporting. The object is also to highlight those aspects of GDR society which were progressive, innovative and forward looking, and from which we can learn and perhaps utilise if we have the chance of creating our own socialist society in Britain or elsewhere.

As in any society or country, there were of course those who disliked the system, didn't fit in or who hankered after Western material wealth. They were the ones who suffered and often became cynical or pessimistic, but they were not a majority. In our own country we also have our share of dissidents, the disaffected and those who would like to change the system. That will be a characteristic of any society, but what is important in evaluating it is the general level of satisfaction of individuals with their everyday lives or, as the Utilitarians would put it, how far 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people' is realised.

Many who visited East Berlin or the GDR from the West (between 1949-89) may demur from the above assessment, retorting that it was grey and depressing, characterised by dilapidated buildings, bare shops and political hoardings. However, such impressions are necessarily superficial and are hardly comparing like with like.

Of course, none of the achievements or progressive aspects of the GDR

enumerated here were perfect or ideal – which country can boast that? There were serious downsides: over centralisation, bureaucracy, shortages, sometimes severe curtailment of personal freedoms, like the right to travel to the West or access to much western culture. However, these downsides were not, we would 45 argue, intrinsic to socialism and many were not even the result of party policy as such, but as a result of Western animosity, interference, blockades, economic isolation and even sabotage.

The GDR was an authoritarian system, dominated by the values of one party, but in the country and society as a whole and in general, there was a disconnection between the often repressive manner of governing and the humanistic goals the leadership and most of the people aspired to. This stands in direct contrast to the racist and nationalistic ideology of the Nazis. In the GDR, policy was strongly based on the long humanistic and socialist traditions of a progressive Germany. To characterise GDR society solely in terms of its repressive features – which were undoubtedly also a reflection of the Cold War context – is to distort history. It also ignores the efforts of the many people who worked selflessly within that society for genuine humanitarian and democratic socialist goals, as well as the many who enjoyed considerable individual and social progress despite or alongside officially-sanctioned state demands. This could be seen in GDR literature, theatre, the popular song movement and rock scene, religious activity and many other areas, where activities and culture gave expression to views very different from the official ones.

Over the two decades since the demise of the GDR, many have come to recognise and regret that the genuine ‘social achievements’ they enjoyed have now been dismantled. Unfortunately, the collapse of the GDR and ‘state socialism’ came just before the collapse of the highly-lauded ‘free market’ system in the West. The GDR experience of socialism stands in marked contrast to the demontage of the welfare state and the concomitant rampant privatisation of every aspect of life now taking place in Western Europe, from culture to healthcare and other essential services, as well as to the denial of social values and the extreme individualisation of life. We live in an atomised society, rapidly falling apart, with little social ethos and no long-term goals. Many today, particularly young people, are living without hope or sense of a secure future. Socialism can still offer an antidote and an alternative. And the experience of socialist countries like the GDR 46 can provide pointers for a way forward and help renew one’s hope

and faith in humanity.

It needs to be realised that it is in the vested interest of capitalism to demonise socialism and the achievements of socialism; its proponents and apologists have and will continue to denigrate the ideas of socialism and anything which suggests that a socialist organisation of society could provide solutions to many of our pressing economic and environmental problems, offer people more satisfying lives, and make society a better, safer and more equitable entity.

In 2008, the weekly political magazine, *Der Spiegel*, conducted a survey of young people asking them their opinions about the GDR. It found that more than half of those from the East defended the GDR and what it stood for. This shocked the German establishment. It is interesting, and telling at the same time, that the conclusion a leading Berlin academic draws from this is that it demonstrates the perpetuation of a false picture of reality, and therefore more needed to be done to teach young people how dictatorial the GDR really was.³⁰

Mary Fulbrook, certainly no apologist for the GDR, wrote in her book *The People's State*,³¹ that 'Ostalgie' (a term invented by the West to describe the so-called nostalgia on the part of many former GDR citizens for their past) alone is not a sufficient explanation of the ways in which people did not 'recognise their own pasts' in the new history textbooks outlining the structures of power and repression.' She goes on: 'The history books that have focussed primarily on the institutions and practices of coercion are not necessarily wrong; but they are to some degree incomplete, and are predicated on an over-simplistic model of the ways in which the GDR system worked, and the ways in which it changed over time.' This is corroborated by first hand accounts by former GDR citizens themselves.

The journalist Erika Maier, who grew up in the GDR, wrote a book: *Einfach leben – hüben wie drüben*³² (Simply living – here, as well as there) because, she says, she got so tired of hearing the refrain: 'How could you East Germans stand it – this GDR state, the paternalism, locked in, spied on by the Stasi?' She realised that those who had never lived in the GDR could never understand fully what daily life was like. Therefore she decided to interview 12 'pairs' of individuals with comparable jobs, one from the East and their counterpart from the West. These biographies illustrate how different the experiences and values in East and West were.

Below are just a few quotes taken from her book to give a flavour of how

GDR citizens understood their own lives. They have the benefit of being able to compare their present lives in a unified, capitalist Germany with those they led in the GDR.

Karin an architect: ‘After unification, I noticed that western architects think in a completely different way. As architects we are socially responsible to society for the built-up environment. I think architects should swear a sort of Hippocratic Oath to work for the wellbeing of mankind just as doctors do.’ Despite the oft condescending comments about ‘socialist barrack-block buildings’, GDR architects were often able to plan and build in an integrated and co-ordinated way; they wouldn’t just design a shop or an old people’s home in isolation, but would look at the whole area and could design buildings that were integrated better into the fabric of the locality. Because of the largely private land ownership in the West such architectural planning is rarely possible. ‘Only after unification did I realise,’ she adds, ‘what level of gender equality we had in the GDR. We also experienced a carefree, protected childhood. Then we had the communities formed in the workplace, in the holiday centres, a good school and committed teachers. I experienced all that consciously and now, today, I know what it can feel like to live without the continuous threat to one’s existence. And then, when we reached adulthood [in the GDR] and began to come up against closed frontiers, the frontier was opened.’

Then there is the *car mechanic Michael* who had been a spokesperson for his Catholic student group in his youth and certainly no apologist for the GDR. He had experienced no problems studying and obtaining the qualifications he needed and went on to open up his own car repair shop. He relates: ‘In the pioneer centres you could build models, do motor sport, various crafts or sing; now young people do little else but go to the disco. What I particularly miss today is the comradeship and friendships I had in GDR times. I find it difficult to adapt to this elbow society; but I suppose every system has its positive and its negative sides!’

And the *farm worker Christa Erdmann:* ‘In the village we supported each other. In the evening after work my brothers came, sometimes a neighbour and helped with the building [of our new house]. That was very different from now. There wasn’t the envy there is today. Now they put it in your employment contract that if you tell anybody what you earn, it’s a sacking offence. In GDR times everyone knew what everyone else earned. What’s bad about that? That’s how mistrust arises and even suspicion is enough to create

divisions among people.’

Or the *GP Regina* who comments: ‘Material wealth was no big issue for me... we didn’t study medicine to earn heaps of money. During our studies and in our work a humanistic ideal was imbued in us, and we carried out our work with that ethos. If I had a wish today, I’d just like to be an ordinary doctor once again. Free from all the budgeting and free from all these accounting constraints.’

It is a truism that if you have never actually lived in a country any attempt at a balanced assessment of life in it is going to be based on second-hand experience. To judge any country simply on Western media reports, bare statistics or the views of dissidents is to accept a one-dimensional picture, and that is what most commentators have done with the communist-run countries.

Hopefully this short evaluation will help demonstrate that socialism is far from dead and buried, and that we can learn from this short-lived attempt at building a socialist society, even though it took place in a Cold War context, under adverse circumstances not of its people’s own choosing. ‘If we don’t learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it,’ as George Washington memorably stated. We would argue that the GDR experience has given us a lot from which we can learn and build on – if we choose to. The example of the GDR, as well as that of other socialist countries, can still offer pointers to a better form of society. Socialism can be built without the negative aspects that marred the systems of Eastern Europe and which provided such invaluable ammunition for the real enemies of socialism.

NOTES 49

- 1 Al Gore. *Earth in the Balance*, Penguin Books London, 1992
- 2 Daniela Dahn. *Wehe dem Sieger! Ohne Osten kein Westen*, Rowohlt, 2009
- 3 Olaf Baale. *Abbau Ost – Lügen, Vorurteile und sozialistische Schulden*. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag München, 2008
- 4 Otto Köhler. *Die Grosse Enteignung – wie die Treuhand eine Volkswirtschaft liquidierte*. Knauer München, 1994
- 5 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Allen Lane London, 2009
- 6 Mary Fulbrook. *The People’s State – East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2005
- 7 *ibid*
- 8 Peter Hübner. *Konsens, Konflikt und Kompromiss – Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik der SBZ/DDR 1945–1970*. Akademie Verlag Berlin, 1995
- 9 Mary Fulbrook
- 10 *ibid*
- 11 Otto Köhler
- 12 Olaf Baale
- 13 Daniela Dahn. *Westwärts und nicht Vergessen – vom Unbehagen in der Einheit*. Rowohlt Berlin,

1996

14 Daniela Dahn

15 Mary Fulbrook

16 Frances Stonor Saunders. *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. The New Press New York, 2000

17 David Childs. *East Germany*. Ernest Benn London, 1969

18 Paul Ginsborg. *Democracy – Crisis and Renewal*. Profile Books London, 2008.

19 ibid

20 ibid

21 Otto Köhler

22 ibid

23 When Saarland, which pre-war belonged to France, joined Germany in 1956 it was granted a transition period of several years during which its products and markets enjoyed special protection, and this despite the fact that, unlike the GDR, it had a similar economic system.

24 Reiner Maria Gohlke, former top manager of IBM and then Chief Executive of German Railways, was brought out of retirement by Chancellor Kohl to

50

take over the presidency of the Trusteeship quango (Treuhand) immediately

after the GDR elections in March 1990. He stated in August 1990: 'I had absolutely no doubt that the renovation of the GDR economy was one of the great challenges of our time. I remained optimistic that the economy on the basis of its resources, particularly the ready availability of engineers and technical expertise, represented a great opportunity; I was not of the opinion that there was little enthusiasm on the part of national or international interests to invest or participate in this process.' Gohlke only remained in the job a few weeks, to be replaced by a more hard line privateer.

25 Horst van der Meer & Lothar Kruss (eds.). *Vom Industriestaat zum Entwicklungsland?* Streitschrift (4). Dieter Joester Vertriebsgemeinschaft Frankfurt/Main, 1991

26 Hanna Behrend (ed). *German Unification – the destruction of an economy*. Pluto Press London, 1995

27 Daniela Dahn

28 These are figures taken from the Statistische Bundesamt Tabellensammlung zu wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Lage in dem neuen Bundesländern quoted in: Stefan Bollinger and Fritz Vilmar (eds). *Die DDR war anders – eine kritische Würdigung ihrer sozialkulturellen Einrichtungen*. Edition Ost Berlin, 2002

29 Daniela Dahn. "Die Braunlage", *Kursbuch*, 162 (2005)

30 "Mit dem Mauerfall aus dem Paradies vertrieben", *Spiegel Online*, 28 June 2009

31 Mary Fulbrook

32 Erika Maier. *Einfach leben – hüben wie drüben*. Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin, 2007